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ABSTRACT

A review of the growing population of students receiving special education services in Florida and the extent to which these students are included in statewide assessments concluded that participation has improved slightly but had not met its goals. The report begins by providing statistical information on the special education population and then describes funding changes that provide funding to school districts based on the special education and general education services the student receives. As a result of the new funding model, legislative appropriations to special education programs appear to have increased greatly, to approximately $3 billion in 1999-2000, which includes $249 million in federal funds. The report also finds that while some students with disabilities participated in Florida Writes! and the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Tests (FCAT) between 1997-98 and 1998-99, the state did not meet its goals for including 85 percent of students with disabilities on these statewide tests. In 1998-99, participation rates on statewide assessment ranged from 50.2 percent to 79.1 percent. The Florida Department of Education is urged to strengthen its assistance to districts to discourage unnecessary exclusion of students with disabilities on state and district assessments. (CR)

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Progress Report

December 1999 Report No. 99-19

State's Testing Participation Goal Unmet in Fast-Growing Exceptional Education Program

at a glance

Florida's exceptional student education (ESE) population continues to grow faster than the student population of basic education programs. From 1996-97 to 1998-99 the ESE population grew 14% while the basic student population grew only 2%.

The Legislature has made several changes affecting the ESE program.

- It changed the way that school districts receive funding for exceptional student programs.
- In order to provide greater accountability for the department's use of resources, it set measures for student performance on statewide assessments such as Florida Writes! and the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT), and it required the department to report the performance of ESE students on these tests.

However, the state did not meet its goal for including 85% of students with disabilities on statewide tests. While the FCAT and Florida Writes! are not appropriate for all students with disabilities, the department should strengthen its assistance to school districts to increase the number of students who do participate.

The department continues to provide technical assistance and monitoring of ESE eligibility determinations, student placement and districts' implementation of the new ESE funding mechanism.

Purpose

In accordance with state law, this progress report informs the Legislature of actions taken by the Department of Education in response to a 1997 OPPAGA report. [1, 2] This report presents our assessment of the extent to which the department has addressed the findings and recommendations included in our report.

Background

Florida's Exceptional Student Education Program serves youths through age 21 who have physical, mental, emotional, or learning disabilities as well as children who are gifted. In the fall of 1998 a total of 440,969 Florida students were receiving exceptional education services. The numbers of exceptional students served by districts ranged from 143 in Lafayette County to 58,030 in Dade County.

[1] Section 11.45(7)(f), F.S.

[2] *Review of the Exceptional Student Education Program Administered by the Department of Education*, OPPAGA Report No. 96-83, April 1997.

EC 307661

The State Board of Education, the Department of Education, and Florida's 67 school districts share responsibility for ESE program design, planning and implementation. The department monitors district programs for quality and compliance with federal and state requirements, and provides technical assistance and staff development. Districts identify students eligible for exceptional education programs and provide services in accordance with federal requirements and state policy.

Federal law drives programs for students with disabilities in Florida. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) requires states to develop educational programs that will provide students with disabilities with the opportunity to receive appropriate special education and related services. It requires states to develop procedures for identifying all students with disabilities and provide those students with a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, which means placement in regular classrooms with non-disabled students whenever possible.

IDEA was amended in June 1997 to change a number of exceptional education policies, procedures, and practices, including a requirement that students with disabilities be included in state and districtwide tests and that the state and districts must have guidelines for participation in alternative assessments.

Prior Findings

OPPAGA's April 1997 report found that Florida's ESE population and program costs were growing faster than the student population and costs of basic education programs. A variety of factors contributed to this growth including rising expectations for public education and increases in the number and percentage of children living in poverty.

The report also found that school districts varied in their use of the ESE Program. Although these differences may have resulted from varying demographic characteristics of their student populations, it may also have resulted from differences in district approaches and the way they used programs to meet student needs.

Neither the department nor the districts had developed a system to evaluate the effectiveness of the ESE Program and, therefore, they could not determine which approaches were the most effective; but the department had begun to develop measures to evaluate program performance.

Finally, our prior report found that alternative strategies for allocating funds to exceptional student education programs could influence the manner in which districts provide services. Under the state's previous model for funding ESE, districts received little additional funding if exceptional students were served in a regular classroom. The department had concerns that this funding model encouraged districts to provide exceptional services in separate, more restrictive settings than was necessary. This was contrary to federal law, which requires states to serve students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

Current Status

Several conditions surrounding exceptional education have changed since our prior report was released.

ESE population continues to grow faster than non-exceptional population

During the 1988-89 to 1995-96 period, Florida's ESE population grew an average of 5.87% per year while its non-ESE

population grew at a rate of 2.95% a year. Since our prior report was published, this difference has widened. From school year 1996-97 to 1998-99, Florida's ESE population grew an average of 6.16% each year, whereas its non-ESE population grew 1.54% each year. Exhibit 1 shows the rate of growth for Florida's ESE and non-ESE populations since 1989-90. Analysis of program expenditure data between 1988-89 and 1996-97, the last year of comparable funding, shows that ESE program costs grew by 101% while basic education costs rose 57% during the same time period.

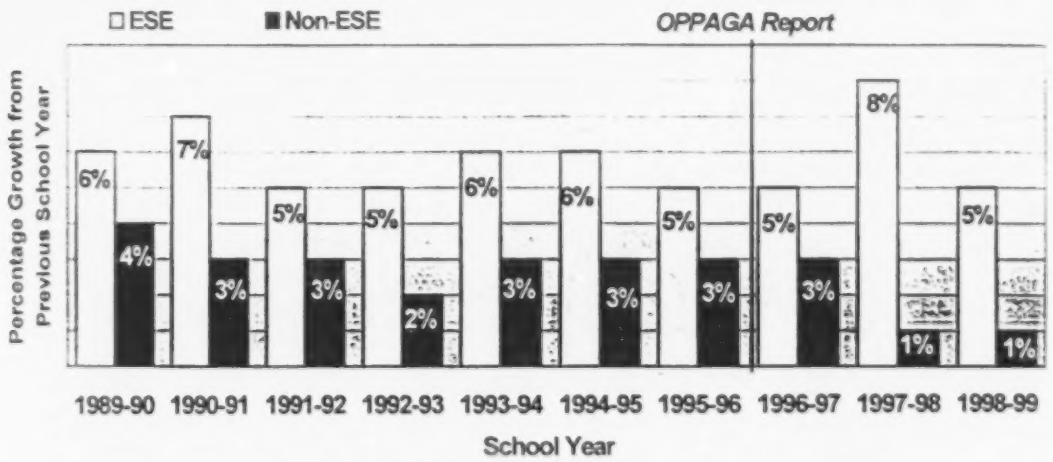
Program funding has changed

The 1997 Legislature adopted a new ESE funding mechanism that substantially revised the way school districts receive funding for services provided to exceptional students.

First, the revised funding model provides funding based on the intensity of services necessary to meet each exceptional student's needs. Second, the revised funding model provides funding for both exceptional services and the basic education services that students receive. In contrast, the previous ESE funding model did not relate funding to the severity of the student's needs, and it funded only exceptional services. Under the previous model, services delivered to exceptional students in a regular classroom with non-ESE students were funded through basic education funding.

As a result of the new funding model, legislative appropriations to ESE programs appear to have increased greatly. The program's total appropriations have risen from $1.6 billion in 1996-97 to approximately $3 billion in 1999-2000, which includes $249 million in federal funds. However, much of the increase is due to the inclusion of funds for basic education, which used to be counted separately from exceptional student education funds.

Exhibit 1
Florida's ESE Population Continues to Grow Faster Than Its Non-ESE Population



Source: Developed by OPPAGA from data provided by the Department of Education.

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Department staff believed that the previous funding model encouraged districts to provide ESE services in more restrictive settings than necessary. The new funding model was designed to encourage districts to provide more of their services in a regular classroom, which is consistent with federal law.

The department must report ESE performance on statewide tests

The 1999 Legislature set performance measures and standards for all students who take Florida Writes! Thus, the standards apply to ESE students as well as non-ESE students. The Legislature required the department to report separately the performance of exceptional students on statewide tests. It also required the department to develop performance standards for math and reading on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) in its Fiscal Year 2000-2001 Legislative Budget Request. However, the standards proposed by the department for students taking Florida Writes! are significantly lower than those designated by the Legislature. Exhibit 2 shows the performance measures and standards established by the Legislature and those proposed by the department.

Exhibit 2
Performance Measures for Florida Students Taking Florida Writes! and FCAT and the Department's Recommended Standards

Performance Measure		Performance Goal Set by the Legislature	Performance Goal Recommended by the Department
For Grade 4	Percent of students scoring 3 or more on Florida Writes!	70%	50%
	Percent of students who attain level 2 or above in reading on FCAT	To be developed by the department	60%
For Grade 5	Percent of students who attain level 2 or above in math on FCAT	To be developed by the department	60%
For Grade 8	Percent of students scoring 3 or more on Florida Writes!	80%	67%
	Percent of students who attain level 2 or above in math on FCAT	To be developed by the department	60%
	Percent of students who attain level 2 or above in reading on FCAT	To be developed by the department	60%
For Grade 10	Percent of students scoring 3 or more on Florida Writes!	85%	75%
	Percent of students who attain level 2 or above in math on FCAT	To be developed by the department	60%
	Percent of students who attain level 2 or above in reading on FCAT	To be developed by the department	60%

Source: Implementing Bill to the General Appropriations Act and the Department of Education's Performance Report.

In order for these measures and standards to be useful, the results must be reported to all stakeholders. The department plans to report disaggregated performance information to districts and schools and also make it available on its Internet site. Full reporting of performance information enables stakeholders to determine how effective district ESE programs are.

Florida has not met its participation goal for students with disabilities in statewide tests

Federal law requires that students with disabilities must be included in statewide tests when appropriate. Test scores are used by education stakeholders and the public to gauge the performance of the state's education programs, including exceptional student education. While the department expects that most students with disabilities should be included in the testing program as they are expected to master the Sunshine State Standards, many are excluded. [3] Some students' disabilities are such that statewide assessments are not meaningful indicators of the individual's educational achievement. The decision to include or exclude a student with disabilities in statewide assessments is made by a team consisting of the students' parents, teachers, school officials and other concerned stakeholders. This decision is guided by the students' past performance, future academic direction and by guidelines which are set by the department and by federal law.

The department disseminated federal and state inclusion guidelines to the school districts and in 1997 developed a goal to include 85% of students with disabilities in statewide tests such as Florida Writes! and the FCAT. Exhibit 3 shows that while some students with disabilities participated in these tests between 1997-98 and 1998-99, the state did not meet its goal for including 85% of students with disabilities in statewide tests. In 1998-99 participation rates on statewide assessments ranged from 50.2% to 79.1%.

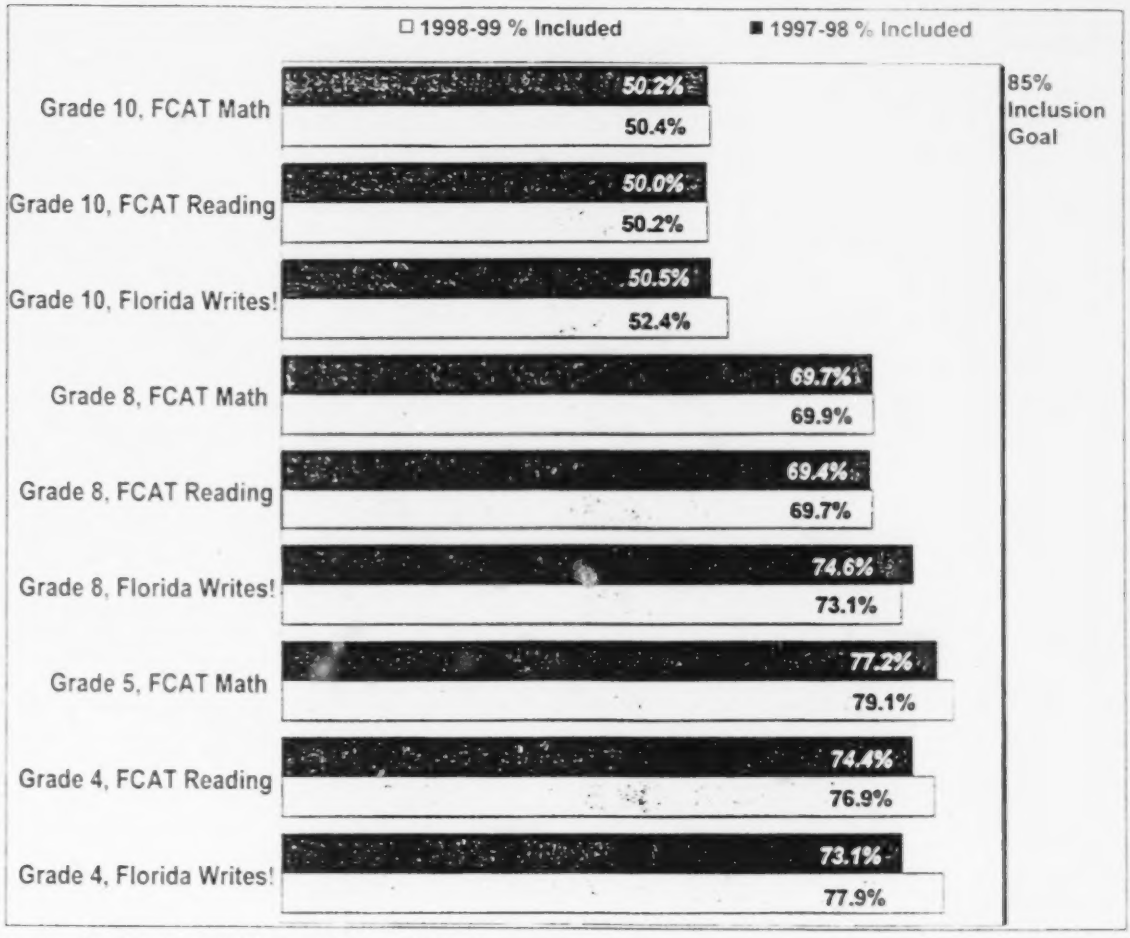
The department should strengthen its assistance to districts to discourage unnecessary exclusion of students with disabilities on state and district assessments. When students with disabilities are unnecessarily excluded from state and district assessments, the results of those assessments have less meaning when trying to measure the performance of ESE programs.

The department provides technical assistance to districts on the placement of ESE students

As OPPAGA recommended, the department continues to provide districts with technical assistance to ensure that students are appropriately classified as exceptional and placed in the appropriate settings to meet their needs. The department has monitored district performance by comparing the rates of Florida students with disabilities to national averages in order to determine if Florida's rates are within norms. The department also investigates parental challenges to ESE eligibility determinations. Program managers indicate that both comparative trend data and parental challenge investigations show that districts are being consistent in their ESE eligibility determinations.

[3] The Sunshine State Standards are the concepts that Florida students are expected to know and understand as they progress through school. The state's assessments, the FCAT and Florida Writes!, measure students' progress on the Sunshine State Standards.

Exhibit 3
Florida Has Improved Slightly in ESE Student Participation in Statewide Tests From the 1997-98 to 1998-99 School Years, But It Still Needs to Work to Meet Its Goal of 85% Participation



Source: Developed by OPPAGA from data provided by the Department of Education.

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The department is monitoring school districts' implementation of the student funding matrix

The new ESE funding model was fully implemented in 1997-98. The department provided training and is monitoring school districts' implementation of the new funding model. Monitoring activities include continuous analysis of district full-time equivalent (FTE) data to determine if there are discrepancies between projected and funded FTE, and expected and actual levels of service provided. Districts project the number of students and the services they will have to provide in order to establish budgets for the following school year. If their actual FTE and services provided are substantially different than what was projected, the districts' funding could be affected.

The department also monitors 15 districts per year on-site and samples student records to determine if the levels of service provided reflect the services the student needs.

The 1997-98 district weighted FTE was 5.45% over the appropriated amount. As a result, the department stressed monitoring and enforcement to the districts. In 1998-99, district weighted FTE was 1.26% under the appropriated amount. School districts appear to be making progress in implementing the ESE funding model.

The Florida Legislature

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- Best Financial Management Practice Reviews for Florida school districts. OPPAGA and the Auditor General jointly conduct reviews to determine if a school district is using best financial management practices to help school districts meet the challenge of educating their students in a cost-efficient manner.

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